



The Socioeconomic Vulnerability of Linemen in Pakistan's Electricity Distribution Sector: A Sociological Analysis of Labor Inequalities

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ABSTRACT

Linemen in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector play an important and vital role to ensure uninterrupted and smooth power supply to the consumers. To maintain electricity supply, they work under severe health and safety conditions. They face hazardous environments, wage disparities, job insecurity and weak labor protections. This study deals with socioeconomic and occupational inequalities between contractual and permanent linemen in a sociological lens. Findings reveal that contractual linemen earn 40% less than permanent workers in Punjab. They are experiencing significantly high workplace injury, disability and fatality. Weak regulatory enforcement and employer driven approaches have worsened labor conditions. They are facing socioeconomic inequality and severe work conditions. Comparative labor analysis highlights that developed countries offer stronger worker protection, health and work safety resulting reduction in workplace fatalities of the linemen. This study digout policy reforms to improve workplace safety of the linemen working in Pakistan electricity distribution sector. This also suggests wage parity and establish employer responsibility to secure the precious lives of linemen.

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1. Introduction

The electricity distribution sector is one of the most hazardous industries in Pakistan. Linemen are exposed to risks being responsible for the installation, repair, and maintenance of electrical networks. They ensure that power supply remains uninterrupted, benefiting industrial productivity and growth of a country. With an indispensable role, linemen are among the vulnerable labor groups in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. They work in physically demanding conditions. The disorganized and random system of distribution network exposing them to electrocution, injuries and fatal falls from height during the working hours. They try to maintain supply with limited resources and gears allocated to them. However, economic and social status of the lineman did not reflect their contributions. Instead, they often work under conditions, earning meager wages while being deprived of essential labor protections (Pakistan Labour Report, 2021). The precarious conditions of linemen in Pakistan mirror larger labor market inequalities. Neoliberal economic policies have intensified job insecurity, reducing opportunities for stable employment while increasing the reliance on contractual labor. These policies reflect the broader global trends of labor flexibilization, as analyzed by Standing (2011), who argues that the rise of the precariat—a class of insecure workers has become a defining feature of contemporary capitalism. Linemen, particularly those on temporary contracts, exemplify this phenomenon. Their lack of legal protections, absence of collective bargaining rights, and limited access to workplace safety mechanisms reinforce their position within the secondary labor market (Doeringer & Piore, 2020).

Employment conditions for linemen vary significantly between permanent and contractual workers. Those with permanent positions receive structured salaries, pensions and medical benefits. In contrast, contractual linemen work without guarantees of job continuity. The

electricity distribution sector's preference for outsourcing labor has enhanced these divisions. Employers bypass labor laws. They were hiring employees through third party contractors. They got shield themselves from legal responsibility and accountability (Shaikh, 2020). This two tier employment structure is close to Braverman (1974) *labor process theory*. In this theory, he argued capitalist enterprises deskill and segment labor to maximize profits. Employers were limiting workers' power with these strategies. The study of linemen in Pakistan highlights a clear example of this exploitative practice. Corporations hire labor at lowest cost while minimizing employer obligations in the country.

Workplace safety remains a one of major concern for linemen in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. NEPRA (2023) indicated that electrocution is the leading cause of occupational fatalities. In year 2022, over 300 linemen lost their lives due to preventable accidents in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. Meanwhile, regulatory authorities failed to hold employers accountable and responsible resulting absence of workplace protection aligns with Korpi (2018) *power resource theory*. In this theory, weaker labor movement and inadequate state interventions leave the workers vulnerable/ exposed to risks. The state's failure to provide safety regulation and compliance with labor laws is indicative of Harvey's (2005) critique of neoliberalism approach. In this perspective, economic deregulation benefits corporation over workers' protection. Studies reveals that linemen also face systemic economic insecurities in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. The wage inequality, provision of PPEs and safety training to permanent and contractual linemen highlight exploitation of the labor and labor laws. Empirical data revealed that contractual linemen earn nearly 40% less than their permanent counterpart. However, they perform the same hazardous duties in serious conditions (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This wage gap is close to (Marx, 2024) *surplus value theory*. He pointed out that capitalists extract value from labor and kept salaries low. Meanwhile, they maximize workers output. Linemen's economic vulnerability is particularly alarming in Pakistan. Low wages, coupled with irregular salary payment, force many contractual linemen into vicious cycle of poverty. They were spending life in debt, limiting their ability to improve their living condition. A comparative review of international labor standard contextualize exploitation of linemen in Pakistan. In Germany and Canada, linemen benefit from union representation, employer-funded insurance and structured career progression paths (International Labour Organization, 2021). They enjoyed workplace safety. They have mandatory protective equipment, strict compliance monitoring and risk assessment procedure at workplace in these countries. By contrast, workers safety conditions in electricity distribution sector are observed unregulated in Pakistan. Enforcement agencies lacking both the capacity and political will to implement necessary reform in Pakistan. This gap reflects the institutional weaknesses (Kalleberg, 2011) and absence of strong labor protections.

1.1. Research Question

The linemen working in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector occupy one of the most hazardous positions. Their work is characterized by high accident rates, financial insecurity and systemic employer negligence. These risks exposing them to persistent economic and physical vulnerabilities. The absence of workplace safety and protections, fair wage policies and effective occupational safety mechanism increases the precariousness of their employment. Furthermore, contractual work arrangements make job security, limit access to social benefits, and weaken bargaining power leaving linemen with few avenues for economic stability. From a sociological perspective, labor inequalities in the electricity distribution sector are deeply embedded in broader structures of economic power, class dynamics, and policy failures. Scholars such as Standing (2011) and Kalleberg (2011) have extensively documented the expansion of precarious work under neoliberal labor regimes. The lived realities of linemen in Pakistan illustrate how these structural shifts manifest in a developing economy with weak regulatory oversight. Linemen are positioned at the intersection of exploitative labor relations, hazardous working conditions, and systemic marginalization. The contribution strengthening the electricity distribution system is overlooked in mainstream labor discourse. This study critically examines the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of linemen through a sociological lens, addressing the following key research question:

1. How do economic precarity, hazardous workplace conditions, and weak labor protections shape the socioeconomic vulnerability of linemen in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector?

2. In what ways do contractual employment structures reinforce labor exploitation, restrict workers' rights, and contribute to income instability among linemen?
3. What policy measures are required to regulate institutional reforms to improve workplace safety, economic security, and social protections for linemen in Pakistan?

This research is critical for policymakers, labor activists, and scholars studying labor inequalities in developing economies. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing debates on labor justice, state responsibility, and corporate accountability. Korpi (2018) *Power Resource Theory*, highlights the importance of collective worker action, unionization, and legislative reforms in addressing labor vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the study engages with international best practices on occupational safety and fair labor standards, arguing that meaningful policy intervention is essential for mitigating the risks and insecurities that linemen. To explore these structural inequalities, this research aspires to propose sustainable solutions that bridge the gap between employer obligations and workers rights in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector.

2. Literature Review

The study of labor conditions in the electricity distribution sector requires an examination of key sociological perspectives, empirical studies and international labor policies. The literature on industrial labor has consistently highlighted how neoliberal labor policies that led to the precarity of blue collar workers (Standing, 2011). This section reviews available research on linemen, focusing on occupational risks, labor exploitation and regulatory failures in Pakistan. Research by Kalleberg (2011) on precarious employment identifies contractual work that is a significant driver of economic instability among blue collar workers. The electricity distribution sector in Pakistan reflects similar patterns. Temporary employment results in high turnover rate and limited career mobility (Pakistan Labour Report, 2021). Doeringer and Piore (2020) revealed labor market segmentation theory. It explains this phenomenon. This issue emphasizes that workers in secondary labor markets experienced minimal job security. They have lower salaries than their counterparts in primary labor market. Co relationship between employment disparity and occupational hazards has been examined in studies on industrial safety in various societies. A study conducted by Yasmin (2020) in Pakistan found that the absence of proper safety regulations significantly increased the likelihood of workplace injuries among electrical workers in Pakistan. This study confirmed that international findings (International Labour Organization, 2020) demonstrated that robust labor protection can reduce workplace fatalities in hazardous occupation like linemen.

Moreover, the role of state regulation in shaping labor conditions has been widely debated in the existing body of knowledge. Harvey (2005) argues that deregulation has weakened labor protections. It has shifted power from workers to corporate entities. The impact of this shift is evident in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. Contractual employment has reduced workers' ability to demand safer conditions and fair compensation in Pakistan (Shaikh, 2020). To further comparative studies on labor conditions in developed economies were examined too. Research on Germany's electricity sector International Labour Organization (2020) showed that strong labor protections and safety regulations have resulted in significantly lower workplace injury rate. This comparison pointed urgent need for Pakistan to adopt more strong labor laws and implementation mechanism.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology. It is grounded in content analysis. It drew upon theoretical and empirical studies to analyze the social and economic conditions of linemen in Pakistan. The study uses archival research, comparative labor analysis and document review. This approach is used to identify work conditions, employment disparities and socioeconomic inequalities among the linemen working in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. The research involves analyzing labor statistics, regulatory reports and policy documents. These documents were published by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) and International Labour Organization (ILO) and scholarly work on the subject. These sources are peer reviewed sociological journal, case studies from labor union and field reports on occupational safety and health.

The theoretical framework guiding this study incorporates *labor market segmentation theory* (Doeringer & Piore, 2020), *power resource theory* (Korpi, 2018) and *precarious*

employment theory (Kalleberg, 2011). These theories are to contextualize inequalities that linemen face in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. These theories provide insight and explain that linemen remain marginalized despite their role in maintaining power infrastructure in Pakistan. This study also applies a comparative approach too. It is contrasting labor protection and workplace safety standards for linemen in Pakistan. This is also comparison of policies in developed economies like Canada, Germany and the United States. This research methodology integrates case study analysis. It is historical account of industrial labor reforms in South Asia. Permanent linemen receive structured salaries, pension schemes and access to healthcare facilities. They also benefit from greater job security. They were less likely to be dismissed. However, contractual linemen, who are up 60% of the workforce, face employment instability due to the prevalence of short-term contracts. They were hired informally. They were excluded from labor protection (Pakistan Labour Report, 2021). They absolved power distribution companies of legal responsibility for their working conditions. This employment model reflects a neoliberal shift toward labor flexibilization. It was outsourcing and casualization have weakened worker rights (Standing, 2011). The methodology is structured into three primary components: data collection, analytical framework, and ethical considerations.

3.1. Data Collection

This study is based upon secondary data sources:

- Government reports like Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) labor market data and National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) workplace safety reports.
- Policy documents from international labor organizations, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO).
- Empirical studies from peer-reviewed journals focusing on labor precarity, industrial safety, and employment stratification.
- Case studies from electricity workers' unions and labor rights organizations in Pakistan, detailing their grievances and demands.

To ensure data validity, these sources were selected on reliability, relevance and recent publication years (2018–2023).

3.2. Analytical framework

The research employs a thematic content analysis method. Data was categorized into key themes: employment conditions, wage disparities, workplace safety and labor policy failures. The study also applies comparative labor analysis. It is juxtaposing Pakistan's linemen's working conditions with Germany, Canada and the United States. This comparison highlights best practices and regulatory approaches that could inform labor reforms in Pakistan and elsewhere in the developing countries (Doeringer & Piore, 2020).

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Although this study relies on secondary data, ethical research practices were observed in any way. All of these sources were critically examined for bias, validity and ethical reporting standard as per Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) Islamabad Ethical Committee Guidelines. No personal data or direct interviews were conducted. It was a kind compliance with institutional ethical review board guidelines of QAU.

3.4. Limitations

This research acknowledges certain limitations:

- Lack of primary field data: The absence of direct interviews with linemen limits first-hand perspectives on workplace struggles.
- Reliance on existing literature: The study is constrained by available empirical studies, some of which may lack comprehensive regional labor data.
- Policy variability: Given Pakistan's evolving labor policies, recent legislative changes may impact the generalizability of findings.

This study provided a robust sociological analysis of linemen's employment conditions. It is offering significant insights for labor unions, policymakers and occupational safety regulators in Pakistan as well as in the developing countries.

4. Results

4.1. Salary Inequality

Results of this study indicated significant disparities in employment conditions and salary structures. It also highlighted occupational hazards that a linemen in Pakistan has to face. Statistical data reveal that contractual linemen earn approximately 40% less than their permanent counterparts. This is leading to long term economic insecurity of the lineman (Pakistan Labour Report, 2021). The precarious employment conditions of linemen were inconsistent salary payments, lack of job security. I found an absence of structured career progression opportunities in this profession. The study confirmed that contractual linemen were more likely to work overtime without receiving adequate compensation and economic vulnerability. The table-1 below presents a comparative overview of employment conditions and workplace risks:

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Employment Conditions and Workplace Risks

Employment Status	Average Monthly Salary (PKR)	Workplace Injury Rate (%)	Access to PPE (%)	Safety Training (%)
Permanent Linemen	80,000	3.5	85	70
Contractual Linemen	45,000	9.8	40	35

These figures revealed that there is a direct relationship between employment and increased occupational risks. Contractual linemen not only earn less than their permanent counterpart but also face higher injury rate due to limited access to safety gears and training programs.

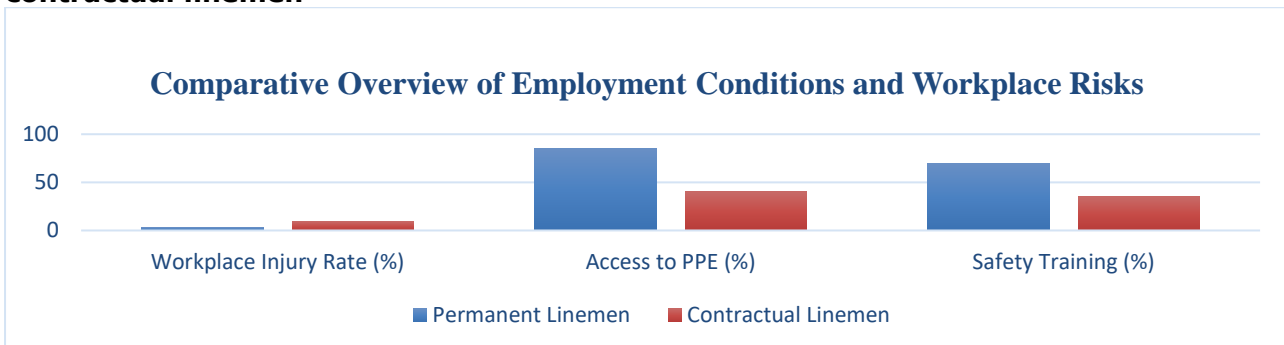
4.2. Work Place Vulnerabilities

Workplace injury rates among contractual linemen are very high as compare to permanent linemen. These injuries and disabilities are mainly due to electrocution, the leading cause of fatalities (.NEPRA, 2023). A review of occupational safety reports suggests that inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and insufficient training programs significantly contribute to workplace hazards, The research highlights that only 35% of linemen in Pakistan receive formal occupational safety trainings. The training rate is higher (90%) in developed economies like Germany and Canada (International Labour Organization, 2020). This discrepancy underscores the need for robust workplace safety policies. It also confirmed that employer accountability mechanism were needed in Pakistan. This labor analysis showed that linemen in Pakistan experience hazardous working conditions than those in developed countries. In Germany, labor protections have resulted in workplace injury rates four times lower than in Pakistan and that is a serious concern too (International Labour Organization, 2021). A deeper analysis of labor market structures reveals that permanent workers in developed economies benefit from state health insurance, job protections and wage increments. However, In Pakistan linemen often rely on informal advocacy networks to seek redress for labor injustices.

4.3. Safety Gagets and Training

A significant insight from the study is the correlation between employment status and workplace safety. Permanent linemen, who have access to formal training and employer-provided safety gagets, report fewer workplace accidents compared to their contractual counterparts.

Figure 1: Disparity in provision safety gagets and trainings to permanent and contractual linemen



A theme emerging from the results was direct correlation between employment status and workplace safety in Pakistan. The study finds that contractual linemen face higher injury rates, largely due to limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and inadequate safety training. These findings confirmed *with (Braverman, 1974) theory of labor process* that argued that capitalist labor systems prioritize productivity over worker welfare. Electricity distribution companies maximize profits and hardly bother about safety protocols.

4.4. Compensation

Another result was lack of compensation for injured linemen in Pakistan. A review of compensation claims filed between 2018 and 2022 indicated that only 25% of workplace injury claims were successfully processed. Many applications were rejected on procedural grounds (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This low success rate in securing compensation underscores institutional inefficiencies. It also highlighted employer resistance to financial liability for workplace accidents. This study argued for urgent labor policy reforms in Pakistan. The introduction of mandatory safety training, strict employer compliance and monitoring and common wage policies may improve linemen's working conditions in the country. The results underscored the need for an immediate policy shift in Pakistan. Global best practices and enforcing employer accountability in Pakistan can reduce workplace hazards. It may improve economic stability for linemen and uphold labor rights effectively. This research also argued that future research should incorporate primary data collection through direct worker interviews to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of linemen. It may validate the trends identified in this study.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into economic and occupational condition of linemen working in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. The results highlight employment disparities, wage gaps and inadequate workplace safety in electricity distribution sector of Pakistan. This discussion contextualized the results within broader sociological framework. It provides validity of empirical literature and theoretical perspectives to interpret the inequalities shaping linemen's working conditions in the distribution sector. The inequalities between permanent and contractual linemen reaffirmed the argument of Doeringer and Piore (2020) in their labor market segmentation theory. The electricity distribution sector is operated on a dual labor market model in Pakistan. Permanent linemen are benefited from wages, structured career advancement and social protection. The contractual linemen are trapped in employment. This segmentation creates a social disadvantage for temporary workers. These propositions aligned with Kalleberg (2011) who described employment of labor control that maintains economic stratification in any way. The high injury rates among contractual linemen reflected a new trend in occupational health and safety failures in developing economies. Studies on industrial labor in South Asia Yasmin (2020) indicate that weak regulatory enforcement and employer non-compliance contribute significantly to workplace hazards in electricity distribution companies (DISCOs) operating in Pakistan. The data in this study showed that only 35% of linemen received formal safety trainings, compared to 90% in developed countries (ILO, 2020). This suggests a regulatory gap in Pakistan's labor policies. The theoretical framework of state centered labor regulation Korpi (2018) supports this analysis too. It is an argument that weak state intervention allowed exploitative labor practices. The wage disparity between contractual and permanent linemen presents another key issue. Findings indicate that contractual workers earn 40% less than permanent employees (*Pakistan Labour Report, 2021*).

Theoretically, this aligned with (*Marx's 1867*) concept of surplus labor extraction. Marx claims that capitalist enterprises extract maximum productivity from workers, while minimizing labor costs. The globalization and labor flexibility framework (*Harvey, 2005*) also explains this trend. He highlights that outsourcing and short term contracts have been used as a means of reducing employer liability. Another point resulted from this study is lack of compensation mechanisms for injured linemen. *The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022)*, reported that only 25% of workplace injury claims filed by linemen between 2018 and 2022 were successfully processed only. This pointed out a systematic failure in institutional support for workplace accidents. The powerresource theory (Korpi, 2018) provides a lens to understand this phenomenon. Workers with low bargaining power are systematically excluded from legal protections, as labor regulations favor corporate interests over worker rights in Pakistan. The results of this study are aligned with existing empirical literature and sociological theories on labor precarity and occupational health risk. The wage disparity, lack of workplace safety

measures and regulatory noncompliance are important factors causing labor exploitation in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. Drawing from Marxist labor theory, labor market segmentation, and power resource frameworks, the study illustrated how contractual employment fostered economic insecurity and workplace hazards. Addressing these issues required labor policies, regulatory enforcement and enhanced worker safety. By implementing best practices and ensuring corporate accountability, Pakistan can create a safer and more equitable working environment for linemen.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study highlights the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of linemen in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. Results reveals that systemic labor inequalities, precarious employment structures, and weak regulatory mechanisms are the factors create a cycle of economic insecurity and occupational risk. The sharp contrasts between permanent and contractual workers reveal how labor segmentation disproportionately affects low-wage linemen. They are deprived of job stability, fair wages, and adequate workplace protections. Despite the hazardous nature of their work, they operate under sever conditions, where occupational safety is secondary to cost-cutting measures imposed by employers. The findings of this research align with broader labor market trends observed in developing economies, where contractualization and informal employment serve as tools of economic marginalization. By drawing on Labor Market Segmentation Theory (Doeringer & Piore, 2020), (Braverman, 1974), Labor Process Theory, and (Korpi, 2018) Power Resource Theory. These theories demonstrate how labor is exploited through policy failures, employer-driven, and absence of strong worker advocacy mechanisms. Contractual linemen are deprived through less pay, insecure jobs, are social protections. These conditions are not an isolated occurrence but a reflection of broader patterns of labor inequality that characterize Pakistan's electricity sector. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires urgent policy intervention, institutional accountability, and an overhaul of existing labor protections.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Labor Protections and Legal Enforcement:** The government must enforce strict labor regulations to eliminate disparities between contractual and permanent linemen. Employers should be legally bound to provide comprehensive occupational health and safety measures, including proper personal protective equipment (PPEs), mandatory risk assessments, and regular safety training programs. To ensure compliance, independent safety audits must be conducted across all distribution companies (DISCOs), with penalties for non-compliant employers.
2. **Transitioning Contractual Linemen into Permanent Employment:** The precarious employment of contractual linemen perpetuates cycles of wage suppression and job insecurity. To address this, labor policies must be restructured to phase out exploitative contractual work arrangements and transition linemen into permanent employment. The introduction of minimum employment tenure regulations would prevent indefinite contract renewals and ensure greater job stability and economic security.
3. **Ensuring Workplace Safety Through Institutional Reforms.** Workplace safety measures must be institutionalized rather than treated as an administrative formality. DISCOs should be legally required to implement regular safety inspections, enforce hazard mitigation strategies, and conduct mandatory emergency response training. The establishment of an independent safety commission would improve accountability and ensure that workplace injuries are properly investigated.
4. **Fair Compensation and Social Security for Injured Linemen.** Workplace accidents often leave injured linemen without sufficient financial support, pushing them further into economic hardship. Establishing an independent labor tribunal for workplace injuries would expedite compensation claims and protect workers from employer-driven delays. Furthermore, mandatory employer contributions to an occupational injury fund should be introduced to ensure that all injured linemen receive medical care, wage compensation, and rehabilitation support.

6.2. Future Research Directions

While this study provides a critical analysis of labor inequalities in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector. Further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of how class, labor policies, and workplace safety intersect. Future studies should:

- Conduct ethnographic research and in-depth worker interviews to provide a firsthand perspective on employment challenges.
- Examine the psychological and social impacts of precarious employment on linemen and their families.
- Explore comparative studies between South Asian countries to assess the effectiveness of different labor policies.
- Track longitudinal changes in workplace safety regulations and their impact on occupational health outcomes.

In a nutshell, the socioeconomic vulnerability of linemen in Pakistan's electricity distribution sector is not a natural inevitability but a consequence of systemic labor exploitation and policy neglect. These linemen are the backbone of the country's power infrastructure putting their lives on risk to continue supply. Despite contributing to national growth, they are deprived of their basic labor rights, fair wages, and workplace safety protections. Addressing these disparities is not just a matter of economic necessity but a moral and ethical imperative. Labor justice must be prioritized, not as a policy afterthought, but as a fundamental right for all the workers. Without structural reforms, strong enforcement mechanisms, and enhanced worker protections, linemen would remain trapped in precarious employment, vulnerable to workplace hazards, and deprived of economic security. It is time for the government, labor unions, and policymakers to take decisive action in ensuring that no worker is forced to choose between livelihood and life itself.

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